

Give farmland a boost but keep our natural heritage intact

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THE 2004 election is a "thinking election", according to Royal Professor Ungku Aziz (*Sunday Mail*, March 14) and his assessment is both frank and fair.

Malaysia has been playing host to major environmental-related forums for almost the entire month of February.

For two weeks ending on Feb 20, Malaysia hosted the Seventh Meeting of the Conference of Parties (COP7) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

And Friday marked the end of the First Meeting of the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (MOP1) which began on Feb 23.

The protocol was adopted as a supplement to the CBD in 2000.

During the COP7, a framework for setting goals, targets and indicators against which conservation efforts would be benchmarked was discussed.

MOP1, on the other hand, focused on the protocol that would govern the transboundary movement of living or genetically modified organism (LMOs or GMOs).

This requires exporters (whether in food, feed or product derivatives) to inform importing countries, namely in the developing world, of the presence of L/GMOs in the goods.

Included are issues related to the documenting of information on L/GMOs, its liability, and redress mechanism and application of the decision-making process.

What is apparent from these meetings is the underlying global concern about the current state of biodiversity in many countries, as a follow-up to what was agreed at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) held in Johannesburg in 2002.

The aim is to significantly reduce the rate of biodiversity loss by 2010 at the various levels.

So far since the convention was adopted a decade ago, the target had not been reached.

According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) each year about 60,000 species become extinct.

This is emphasized by the fact that the current extinction rate has increased to an unacceptable figure, thousands times from the zero extinction estimated in the 1900s.

More needs to be done if 20 per cent of the global population responsible for 80 per cent of global consumption is to be controlled, and the natural heritage protected.

Malaysia, one of the dozen countries that are mega-rich in biodiversity, has a major role to play in ensuring this, since it has about 16 per cent of the world's classified species.

To date, although a pledge was made during the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro to maintain 50 percent of forest and tree cover in perpetuity, Malaysia is still losing a number of our natural heritage.

One report cited that almost 700 species, mainly timber trees, are at risk of vanishing from the wild.

Malaysia has the dubious honour of being placed second only after Ecuador, with about 1,000 species of endangered plants in terms of the number of biodiversity lost.

This is despite the country having ratified the CBD in 1994, and then launched the National Policy on Biological Diversity four years later in 1998, with a vision to make the country a world centre of excellence in conservation, research and utilisation of tropical diversity by 2020.

Clearly, we have a long way to go and more ought to be done before this vision could be realized in the next 15 years.

More so in the effort to redouble the economic opportunities in the agro-sector, extra precautions must be taken so that the direct threat to the natural surrounding is minimized, if not eliminated.

Unless this is done, the environment, biodiversity and all, could be obliterated faster than any attempt to conserve and protect whatever is left.

Last year alone, Malaysia imported more than RM10 billion worth of food and this means an aggressive agricultural policy is required to offset the current dependency on food imports. Here is where biodiversity is most vulnerable.

Hence, while it is commendable the agro-sector is given a boost, it must not be done at the expense of its natural heritage.

One real threat is the potential excessive use of agro-chemical that could poison not only the environment but also its inhabitants – plants, animals and humans.

Apart from banning or restricting their use, alternatives in the form of biofertilisers and biopesticides should also be the thrust of the new agricultural policy if the environment is to be saved.

Still another point that needs serious consideration is Malaysia's interest in leapfrogging its economic productivity through biotechnology which involves the application of technology on living organisms.

The goal is to add value to the species or the process or product derived from it. In short, this is an opportune sector aided by the megadiversity that Malaysia is blessed with.

However, this too must be handled responsibly. It must not be carried out at the expense of sustainable development.

While it is hoped that agriculture and biotechnology would be the new sources of the nation's wealth, the relationship between poverty and biodiversity cannot be overlooked.

This is even more worrying, in view of the 2003 Human Development Report which found that more than 50 countries had grown poorer in the last decade.

Putting this into perspective, poverty reduction must be an integral goal in trying to reduce biodiversity loss by making them beneficiaries, too, of the newly-created wealth in the agro – and biotech sectors.

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